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C O N F I D E N T I A L DHAKA 001131

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 3/13/2015

TAGS: PREL PGOV BG

SUBJECT: TARIQUE RAHMAN ON COUNTRY WIDE LISTENING TOUR

Classified By: P/E Counselor D.C. McCullough, Reason(s): 1.4 (b),(d)

¶1. (SBU) Since the beginning of January, BNP Senior Joint Secretary Tarique Rahman has been conducting a country wide

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grass roots "listening" tour. At each subdistrict, he hosts political rallies with local leaders and party members. His agenda is full of stock BNP messages such as warnings against those who resort to "anarchic politics, conspiracy and hartal." When he opens the floor to questions, he addresses local concerns. At a February rally in Chittagong, according to media reports, he urged leaders to highlight the successes of the BNP government, calling upon party leaders to inform the people about government subsidies for farmers, allowances for elderly people, stipends for female students, and making the country free from plastic bags.

¶2. (SBU) Visiting subdistricts that have been dominated by the Awami League since independence, sources report that Tarique uses voter statistics and polling to determine the important local issues at each location. At each stop, Tarique's staff hand out BNP folders that contain an audiocassette with speeches by his father, the late President Zia Rahman, press talking points for local leaders, the BNP party strategy, a response paper to the 21 August grenade attack on the Awami League rally, and a government statistic sheet to show what the BNP has done for the people. His plainclothes security detail encourages people to come up and talk to Tarique.

¶3. (SBU) Initial negative press reporting and senior BNP leader grumbling about Tarique's "grandstanding" have all but died out, according to sources. After each event, Tarique returns to Dhaka for a day or two to handle central party matters. During this time, he personally signs response letters to the attendees at the various rallies. These response letters contain regionally specific issues and discussion on how to address them. By the first week of April, he will have, he says signed 18,000 letters.

¶4. (C) Tarique told poloff that he will complete his tour by the end of March and then stay in Dhaka during April before beginning a May follow up campaign in a more targeted manner.

¶5. (C) Comment: Tarique's listening tour represents his political "coming out" party and coincides with his growing public profile in recent months. Whether he can succeed in capturing the BNP grassroots or expanding his popular standing remains to be seen. End Comment.

THOMAS